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Genealogy of Jefferson Davis

ADDRESS

DELIVERED OCTOBER 9, 1908, BEFORE LEE CAMP, NO. 1,
CONFEDERATE VETERANS, RICHMOND, VA.

BY

WILLIAM H. WHITSITT

PROFESSOR OF JAMES THOMAS JR., SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY,
RICHMOND COLLEGE

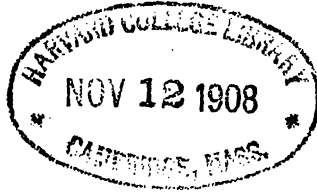
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Genealogy of Jefferson Davis

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The Author

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Genealogy of Jefferson Davis

I AM sincerely grateful to the gentlemen of Lee Camp and in particular to Comrade Freeman, who made the motion, for the invitation extended to me to deliver an address upon some Confederate subject. It was suggested by Comrade Freeman, that I should present a tribute to the Confederate Army of the West, and speak a kind word for the soldiers of that service. I hold my comrades of the Western Army in the highest esteem and affection. They were brave and honorable soldiers, but I am not able to do justice to their memory. I held no high position among them, and I did not understand a great deal concerning the military operations that went forward before my eyes. I have learned more about these operations by reading over the dispatches in the so-called "Rebellion Records," than I was able to find out when I was on the spot, and watched the progress of them. Moreover I have never made any special study of military science, and I feel convinced that it would be out of my power to speak of the soldiers of the Western service in a manner that would be equal to the present occasion, or worthy of their skill and courage.

After some reflection I have concluded to address you on the Genealogy of President Jefferson Davis, which appears to be a

worthy Confederate subject, about which very little has been said hitherto. The materials are as yet incomplete, and I shall be compelled in several places to indulge in hypothesis; but the working hypothesis is an indispensable resource. I have decided to make a beginning, in the hope that other investigators will find additional material, and clear up the points that may remain imperfect in my treatment of the subject.

The most important material consists of certain notices which Mr. Davis himself dictated a short while before his death. These were included by Mrs. Davis in the opening chapter of her Memoir of his life. The brief statements which are there set down supply an indispensable clew. It was known that the Davis family were of the Baptist persuasion, but when and where they had become Baptists was something unknown until Mr. Davis himself gave the requisite hint. We must thank him for showing us the way. It would have been impossible to turn a wheel without his assistance and direction.

The records of the Baptist Church to which his ancestors seem to have belonged, stand next in importance to the testimony of Mr. Davis. These were published in the year 1904, in two parts by the Historical Society of Delaware, who have thereby rendered a memorable service indeed. We owe much honor and many thanks to the Historical Society of Delaware. Following is the title of Paper Number XLII., issued by that learned corporation:

Records of the Welsh Tract Baptist Meeting, Pencader Hundred, New Castle County, Delaware, 1701 to 1828. In two parts. Copied from the Original Records in the Possession of the Meeting Officials. The Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington, 1904.

In quoting from this record it will be necessary to bring forward certain controversies that were raised among the brethren, but these will be employed merely as items of history. I shall endeavor strictly to observe the proprieties of the occasion and

the requirements of the historic method. If I should fail to reach the ideal in these particulars, the failure will be due to defect of skill, and in no sense to defect of purpose and principle. I appeal to your generosity, and request a favorable construction.

It affords me much satisfaction to commend the example of the Historical Society of Delaware. The genealogical notices given by Mr. Davis were entirely useless to me until I was enabled to obtain a sight of the Welsh Tract Records. By comparing the one with the other many secrets were revealed, and many difficulties were removed. I trust that other learned bodies among us will be encouraged to render assistance to historical students in that fashion. I rejoice that just now the Confederate Museum is issuing Douglas Freeman's Calendar of the Confederate Papers in its possession. This is a work of high importance, and the preparation and publication of it is a proof of the enlightened policy of that great corporation.

Jefferson Davis says, "Three brothers came to America from Wales in the early part of the eighteenth century. They settled at Philadelphia." (Memoir by his Wife, Vol. 1, p. 3). This is a pregnant sentence indeed. This led to comparisons and afforded a clew that supplied access to the subject. Taken in connection with these words, the Welsh Tract Meeting and the Welsh Tract Records must acquire very high significance, and they will commend themselves in future to multitudes of people.

The opening sentences of these records describe the beginning of the church in the following words: "In the year 1701 some of us who were members of the churches of Jesus Christ in the countys of Pembroke and Caermarthen, South Wales in Great Britain, (professing believers baptism, laying-on-of-hands, election and final perseverance in grace) were moved and encouraged in our own minds to come to these parts, viz.: Pennsylvania; and after obtaining leave of the churches it seemed good to the Lord and to us, that we should be formed into church order, as

we were a sufficient number: and as one of us was a minister: that was accomplished and withal letters commendatory were given us, that if we should meet with any congregations of christian people who held the same faith with us, we might be received by them as brethren in Christ.

“Our number was sixteen: and after bidding farewell to our brethren in Wales, we sailed from Milford Haven in the month of June the year above mentioned, in a ship named James and Mary; and landed in Philadelphia the eighth of September following:

“After landing we were received in a loving manner (on account of the gospel) by the congregation meeting in Philadelphia and Pennepek, who held to the same faith with us (excepting the ordinance of Laying-on-of-hands on every particular member) with whom we wished much to hold communion at the Lords-table; but we could not be in fellowship with them in the Lords-supper; because they bore not testimony for God touching the forementioned ordinance. (Records, Pt. I., pp. 7, 8.)

* * * * *

“After our arrival we lived much scattered for about a year and a half, yet kept up our weekly and monthly meetings among ourselves: during which time it pleased God to add to our number about twenty members, in which time we, and many other Welsh people purchased a tract of land in New Castle County, on Delaware, which was called Welsh Tract: in the year 1703 we began to get our living out of it, and to set our meetings in order and build a place of worship which was commonly known by the name of, The Baptist meeting-house by the Iron-hill.” (Records, Pt. I., p. 8.).

* * * * *

“The names of the members who first came over were:

Thomas Griffith “minister”

Year . Griffith Nicolas

1701. Evan Edmond

John Edward

Elizeus (Elisha) Thomas

Enoch Morgan

Righart (Richard) David

Elizabeth Griffith

Lewis Edmond

Mary John

Mary Thomas

Elizabeth Griffith

Shonnet (Jennet) David

Margaret Matheas

Shonnet (Jennet) Morris

James David” (Records Pt. I., pp. 11, 12.)

The Davids mentioned in the above list seem to be the ancestors of President Davis. They fulfill all the conditions of the case. They were of the Baptist faith. They emigrated from Wales and settled near Philadelphia in the early part of the eighteenth century. They retained their Philadelphia home for eighteen months and then removed to New Castle County, Delaware. So far as history informs us, there was no other Baptist family of the name of Davis, that came from Wales in the early part of the eighteenth century, and settled at Philadelphia.

President Davis speaks of three brothers, the youngest of whom named Evan was his grandfather. Richard and James David (Records, pp. 11, 12) were charter members of the church and they may have been brothers, but there is no account of Evan Davis. Shion Dafydd subscribed the Philadelphia Confession in February 1716 (Records, p. 21), and my edition of Webster's Dictionary affirms that Evan is “the same as John,” but Charlotte M.

Yonge in her History of Christian Names, p. 273, expresses herself with less confidence, and is only willing to say that "Evan *may* be intended for John." If Evan was intended for John, then the Welsh Tract Records may supply the names of the three brothers. But I am inclined to doubt somewhat concerning the three brothers. Richard David seems to have been the head of the family.

Samuel Davis, the President's father was born in the year 1756, and was an only son. Evan the grandfather may have married his wife, the Widow Williams, about the year 1755, and he is supposed to have been at least sixty years of age at that time. That is a possible construction, but it would seem more likely that Evan was born in America rather than in Wales. It is not uncommon for people to omit a generation or two, who undertake to trace their genealogy without the assistance of contemporary records.

In the year 1711 Martha Thomas was added to the Welsh Tract Church by baptism; apparently a daughter of Elisha Thomas, who later was selected as the second pastor. She was the first and only person with the Christian name of Martha that is found in the early lists of membership. In February, 1716, Martha Thomas disappears and the name of Martha Dafis occurs for the first time. My hypothesis is that she had married, meanwhile, one of the Davis young men. In the year 1732 the case of Martha Dafis was brought before the Church, and the records give the following account of it:

"The rebellion of Martha David against the Church appeared,

(1) In opposing the truth which she once professed to the church according to the commandment of Christ and the practice of the Apostles under the ministry of the New testament.

(2) In refusing instruction, and despising advice tho' offered many a time by the brethren in particular, and by the church in general.

(3) In breaking covenant with the church by carrying unconnected pieces of what was talked in the church to the Presbyterians to have their opinion of them, tho' the church charged her beforehand not to do so.

(4) In being so false and unfaithful in carrying her tales so that she has curtailed the truth and increased her falsehoods; and thereby hath wronged the church by her change of opinion, and putting a false gloss upon what was said to her—and putting it in the power of enemies to blaspheme—also to renew the variance between us and the Presbyterians, for which causes she was put out of the church Mar. 4, 1732.

N. B. She was President Davis's mother." (Records, p. 26.)

I have striven in vain to discover the Christian name of the father of President Samuel Davies of Princeton College. James David, whose name appears last on the list of Charter members, may have been his father, but of that point we cannot be certified. According to Dr. Foote (Sketches, p. 158), the father of Samuel Davies was born in the year 1680, he died on the 11th of August, 1759, apparently in Hanover County, Virginia; but the records of that county were destroyed at the close of the Confederate War, and it will hardly be possible to obtain any further information concerning him. Richard David died on the 16th of February, 1719 (Records, pt. 1, p. 24). His wife, Shonnet (otherwise written Janneth) was the first member of the church to pass away (Records, p. 23). She died on the 10th of June, 1701, and may have been buried at sea.

Much freedom was employed in spelling the name. The clerk of the church wrote it usually, but not invariably, David. On the 4th of Feb., 1716, many of the members subscribed the Philadelphia Confession of Faith, and here the spelling was both variant and archaic. It appears that every person wrote his own name with his own hand, and took liberty to spell it in his own way. In that place the name Richard Davis is

spelled Rhichart Dafydd. Martha Davies, the mother of President Davies of Princeton, spells her name Martha Dafis (Records, p. 20). David Davis spelled it Davis (Records, p. 21), as did also Janott Davis, who subscribed in the year 1724 (Records, p. 22). President Davies appears from these Records to have been the first person of the family connection to put an "e" into the body of the name, and spell it Davies.

It was considered disorderly in the early period for young people to marry without advising with the church. (Records, p. 77.) While they were still in Philadelphia, and before the removal to Welsh Tract, one of the young fellows of the Thomas family, appears to have violated that rule. His wife, however, seems to have healed all the trouble, by uniting with the church. In the year 1702 her name appears as Easter Thomas (Records, p. 12), and in the year 1716 she subscribed the Confession of Faith as Estor Thomas. (Records, p. 20.) But apparently she was not content with her lot, and in the year 1733 the following entry occurs:

"At our quarterly meeting, Jun 9, 1733 Then was Esther Thomas excluded.

"She was under a kind of suspension for some considerable time before; for her lukewarmness, and negligence and for blaming the doctrine and for carrying her grand daughters to the presbyterians to be sprinkled contrary unto the will of their father and mother while alive, which then were dead. She also left the church and joyned with ye presbyterians—And was therefore excluded." (Records, p. 75.) Though her exclusion followed that of Martha Davies by fifteen months, her influence appears to have been paramount in the action of her sister-in-law. They both showed commendable filial piety in avoiding every issue until after the death of their father, Elisha Thomas, the second pastor, who passed away on the first of September, 1730 (Records, p. 25).

In the Journal of the Rev. Samuel Davies the following entry occurs under date of Monday, November 12, [1753]:

"Went to see my relations in the tract; and when I passed by the places where I formerly lived or walked, it gave a solemn turn to my mind" (Foote, Sketches, p. 237). One may wonder whether he encountered Evan Davis on this visit to his relations in the Tract. Three years later there was born to Evan his only son and heir. The Christian name of Samuel had been apparently unknown in this particular family, until it was introduced by Martha Davies. President Samuel Davies says:

"I cannot but mention to my friend an anecdote known to but few; that is that I am a son of prayer, like my namesake Samuel, the prophet; and my mother called me Samuel, because, she said, I have asked him of the Lord." (Foote, Sketches, p. 158). Evidently it was an unaccustomed name, but Evan Davies may have been so charmed by the presence of the great preacher, and by the luster of his name in Europe and America, that he elected to call his own child Samuel in honor of him. That appears at least a rational explanation of the Christian name of the father of Jefferson Davis.

The notices given by Jefferson Davis are brief, and not always distinct. He says: "The youngest of the brothers, Evan Davis, removed to Georgia, then a colony of Great Britain. He was the grandfather of Jefferson Davis. He married a widow whose family name was Emory. By her he had one son, Samuel Davis, the father of Jefferson Davis." (Memoir by his Wife, Vol. 1, p. 3.)

When did Evan Davis remove to the Colony of Georgia? If his son Samuel Davis was born in the year 1756, the union with the Widow Williams must have taken place before that time. But Georgia was an unlikely place for Evan Davis to obtain any but an Indian wife prior to the year 1756. Moreover the language of Mr. Davis does not appear to certify that Evan Davis

married Mrs. Williams in Georgia. He may have removed to Georgia some time after his marriage to her.

It seems possible, in fact, that Evan Davis, may have obtained his wife from the communicants of Welsh Tract Church in Pennsylvania. A family of the name of William, which later came to be written Williams, was established in the Welsh Tract community as early as the year 1710, at which time Mary William from Kilcam in Wales was received as a member of the church (Records, p. 14). Shion William appears to have been the head of the family. He signed the Philadelphia Confession of Faith in 1716 (Records, p. 20), and was buried under the name of John William on the 30th of September, 1718. Margaret William was also a signer of the Confession (Records, p. 20).

During the years 1735, 1737 and 1738, quite a number of people were sent forth from Welsh Tract church in Delaware to build another church on Pedee River in South Carolina. Their names are all carefully preserved in the records (Records, Pt. 1, pp. 83-85). The new church that was established in Carolina was styled Welsh Neck, in memory of the mother church from which it had sprung. It is still an influential community, and Welsh Neck Association has grown up about it, an organization of more than twenty churches, that is highly respected in all sections of the Southern country.

It seems natural to conclude that Evan Davis in traveling Southward should have called at Welsh Neck, where many people resided with whom he had been on familiar terms. Margaret William of Welsh Tract had become a member of Welsh Neck (Records, p. 84), and it does not appear a violent hypothesis that one of her sons may have married a Miss Emory of South Carolina, and that she in the charm of her widowhood may have won the heart and hand of Evan Davis. Upon reflection it it appears more likely that the Emory family in question may have belonged to South Carolina, than to Georgia or Pennsylvania.

Assuming that Evan Davis tarried for a season in South Carolina, it is pertinent to inquire after the special attraction that could have induced him to remove to Georgia. The religious sentiments of Welshmen are apt to be very profound and controlling. The Davis family seem to have been no exception to this rule. In the year 1755, when the Scotch-Irish migration was moving Southward, Shubael Stearnes and Daniel Marshall, a couple of Baptist ministers, joined the procession at Winchester, Va. Stearnes halted in North Carolina, but Marshall followed the procession all the way to Georgia, and when their work had been completed there were many Scotch-Irish Baptists in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.

Marshall had advanced as far as Edgefield District, South Carolina, in 1767, where he founded Horse Creek Church, about fifteen miles north of Augusta. In the year 1771 he transferred his residence across the Savannah, about twenty miles north of Augusta, where he established Kioka church, whose members resided both in Georgia and South Carolina. The fame of Kioka went abroad into every quarter of the country; it became a great center of influence. The religious magnet probably drew Evan Davis more strongly than any other. He seems to have been pleased with the temperature of the Scotch-Irish religion, and to have removed his home and membership from Welsh Neck to the church at Kioka. It is not likely that he settled in Georgia before the year 1771. Samuel Davis was fifteen years old at this time, and it may be that he, too, had become a communicant of Kioka church before the outbreak of the Revolution.

Samuel Davis was nineteen years of age at the opening of hostilities. Mr. Davis reports that the young man entered the military service, and in the course of time raised a company of infantry, which he commanded until peace was declared. It was during his connection with the Army, according to President Davis, that

he met Miss Jane Cook, the Scotch-Irish lassie who became his wife and the mother of his children. This may be a correct statement, but it appears more likely that Samuel Davis, always a strict attendant upon Baptist meetings, should have met her at some session of the Georgia Baptist Association, a very large and powerful body composed of churches situated on both sides of the Savannah River. She may have been a member of one of the Baptist churches in Edgefield or Abbeville District, South Carolina, whose hospitality the Georgia Association had been thankful to accept. The Rev. Mark Cook was a valued minister of the Georgia Association, and though he resided on the Georgia side of the Savannah, it is possible that he had come from South Carolina, and that Miss Jane Cook may have been a near relative. The union of two such splendid races as the Welsh and the Scotch-Irish was auspicious in many ways. It produced a man of remarkable spirit and capacity, who became one of the foremost figures in American history.

If anybody is willing to assist in promoting this investigation, he might render excellent service by examining the records of New Castle County, Delaware, for additional traces of the Davis family from 1703 to 1775. Possibly the records of Welsh Neck Church, or of Darlington County, S. C., might produce some notices of the life of Evan Davis in the period before his removal to Georgia. President Davis affirms that his father, Samuel Davis, was elected clerk of the county court where he resided in Georgia. If search was made, in Richmond or Columbia County, for the books that were written during his term of office, it would be appreciated.

Welsh Tract and Welsh Neck were both important fanes of Baptist religion, but Kioka appears to have transcended them in power and influence. From Kioka the Baptist religion was extended all over Georgia, and likewise into portions of Middle Tennessee and Southern Kentucky. Samuel Davis went to South-

ern Kentucky and settled in Christian County, where his eminent son was born on the 3d of June, 1808. Here he was connected with Bethel church, a prosperous community. In later years Bethel Association was formed around it, which became distinguished in the annals of Kentucky Baptists. It established Bethel College at Russellville, and Bethel Female College at Hopkinsville, both of which have been respectable for learning and usefulness.

Shortly before the opening of the war of 1812, Samuel Davis sought another home, and settled in Wilkinson county, Mississippi. Here also he seems to have been an active religious leader. He was probably a member of another Bethel church situated near Woodville, the county seat of Wilkinson. This church belonged to Mississippi Association, from which the Baptist religion was spread abroad in the States of Mississippi and Louisiana. He died on the 4th of July, 1824, at the age of sixty-eight years.

During the progress of this investigation I have advanced several hypotheses, and it is likely that some of them may be set aside through additional research. The main conclusion that I have reached, however, namely, that the Davis family were remarkable for religious energy and efficiency, will be likely to endure. Samuel Davies of Princeton was the incomparable ornament of their colonial period, and his namesake, Samuel Davis (provided my hypothesis will hold), was an effective religious figure of the middle period, who won a good degree in the States of Georgia, Kentucky, and Mississippi. He was always found upon the high places of the field; always at centers of large and profitable procedure.

In an address that he made at the dedication of the Baptist church in Kentucky, that had been erected upon the spot where his father's house once stood, Jefferson Davis is reported to have affirmed that his father was a better man than himself. Possibly he was referring to the punctual exercise of the cares and

offices of religious life. His father may have excelled him in that particular, because his father lived in a different age, and was more secluded from the business and conflicts of life. But Jefferson Davis possessed high religious energy and devoutness. There were pranks at school and college, but he was a sturdy and studious lad. In his public life there were many seductions and temptations, but he kept a stainless escutcheon. He failed in the greatest conflict of his life, but perhaps no other leader in the Confederacy could have come as near to success. And after defeat had claimed him for her own, he endured for many years a great burden of reproach and sorrow, with manly dignity and courage. There was displayed the excellent religion of his fathers; finer, perhaps, than any that you and I possess.

“His life was gentle; and the elements
So mixed in him, that Nature might stand up,
And say to all the world ‘This was a man.’”









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